

An Introduction to Stuart Hall's Essay

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STUART HALL was born in Jamaica in 1932. He was, for a decade, the director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and is currently Professor of Sociology at the Open University. He is one of the central figures in the continuing development of marxist cultural theory and critical practice. While his influence and importance are widely felt in many sectors of the British left, his work (not to mention the power of his presence) remains relatively unknown in the U.S., most significantly among communication researchers. This is ironic for it is to the mass media and popular culture that Hall, his students and his colleagues have consistently turned and returned as the object of their investigations; they have attempted to theorize the "political and social existence of culture" by elaborating and extending marxist notions of ideology, determination, etc. Yet their theorizing has always been complemented by their concrete analyses and by their attempt to locate, within the sphere of culture and communication, the possibilities for active political and ideological struggle.

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During the summer of 1983, Hall delivered a series of lectures on cultural studies as part of the Teaching Institute on Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, organized by the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.¹ The following essay, a revision of the sixth of nine lectures, is intellectually central to Hall's position. For this reason, it may be useful to frame its argument. We have chosen to publish this particular essay, not only because it provides a clear statement of his theory of ideological articulation, but also because it demonstrates how Hall positions himself within the larger terrain of contemporary cultural theory.

In "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms" (Hall, 1980), Hall described the two major camps within marxist cultural studies as "culturalism" and "structuralism." The former, best represented by Raymond Williams, emphasizes the creativity of the cultural process and the active autonomy of human practices (often condensed in notions of Praxis); it places experience (ultimately class-determined) as the epistemological source and political standard of the social formation as a totality. The latter, represented by Louis Althusser, emphasizes the complexity of and the contradictions within the social formation, conceptualized as a structure of practices. At different historical moments, different

practices are "in dominance." Social agents, either individuals or classes, are seen as produced by different practices and, in this sense, as the bearers or supporters of this structure rather than as its authors. Hall critiques both of these paradigms: Althusser, for the structural-functionalism into which he falls; Williams, for the assumption of an identity between class and experience and for privileging creativity over the determinate "de-centering" of the subject. Hall argues for a middle position between culturalism and structuralism.

The present essay theorizes this position around the concept of "ideology." Describing Hall's indebtedness to Althusser, it demonstrates the importance of the "Althusserian moment" which moves cultural studies onto a structuralist terrain. Hall accepts a structuralist critique of culturalism's theoretical humanism and its essentializing of experience, in favor of "living with difference." He rejects Williams' emphasis on the unity of the social formation (and the corresponding creative identity of the subject), which assumes a "necessary correspondence" between different levels of the social formation (e.g., between practices, experience and class position). But Hall also refuses to follow Althusser beyond a certain point and, drawing on the work of the Italian marxist, Antonio Gramsci, defines "the limit" position of the structuralist displacement of all identities into differences. At this site of struggle with structuralism, Hall theorizes a space between the two paradigms.

Althusser's work is taken as standing for a whole complex body of writing which either directly or indirectly attempts to rework or reread classical marxism in the light of a structuralist critique. Hall's argument here is primarily with those tendencies in

Althusser which lead to a position of "necessary noncorrespondence." The debate between Hall and this "poststructuralist Althusserianism" has become, in fact, a major debate in contemporary cultural theory, defining new issues and reproblematising old terms. Hall's limited structuralism, with its Gramscian influence now confronts a more extreme appropriation of structuralism's emphasis on difference. This set of positions, drawing not only upon Althusser but also upon Lacan's structural psychoanalysis, Derrida's deconstructionism, and Foucault's discourse theory (and his subsequent "microphysics of power") has been most forcefully championed in Britain in journals such as *Screen* and *Ideology and Consciousness* (later *I & C*), in the work of Hindess and Hirst, and by various feminist groups (e.g., the *m/f* collective). The post-structural abandonment of any appeal to a real (or to experience) outside of discourse, and the absolute commitment to difference and rupture undercuts any attempt to theorize the "complexity of a unity," according to Hall.

Hall defines his theory in the middle ground between necessary correspondences (in humanism and functionalism where they are guaranteed in, respectively, the first and the last instances) and necessary noncorrespondence: as a theory of "no necessary (non/) correspondence," as a "marxism without guarantees." He conceives of social and political practices as attempts to bring about and effect what cannot be guaranteed, either by the economic or by another *deus ex machina*. Complex structures or unities are not given but they can be constructed—"articulated"—depending on the nature of the historical conjuncture and the balance of forces in struggle at any time. Thus, the concept of "hegemony," borrowed from

Gramsci, becomes crucial for setting a more historically contingent and contradictory limit on the functionalism into which Althusser frequently slipped. Hegemony is not the always, ever-present, guaranteed position of dominance of a ruling class or a dominant social bloc. Rather it represents the struggle of such a bloc to articulate a variety of social and ideological practices within a "structure-in-dominance" so as to achieve that complex unity of effects which enables a dominant social alliance to exert leadership, direction and authority over a whole social formation, including over the dominated classes within it (who, of course, remain both distinct from the ruling bloc and yet constantly and actively subordinated to it). If the influence of culturalism can still be observed in this position, it is not because Hall accepts the culturalist premise of a correspondence between class and experience but because, principally under Gramsci's influence, he has "re-read" the structuralist paradigm away from its tendency (in both its functionalist and poststructuralist versions) to abstractly read effects off from the structure, and more towards the determinate but in the end, unpredictable, historically contingent outcomes of particular forms of struggle and contradiction.

In the present essay, this theoretical debate is embodied in a reconsideration of the concept of "ideology." Orthodox marxist theory sees ideology as "false knowledge" directly determined by—a mirror reflection of—relative class position. The culturalist orientation, while maintaining this necessary correspondence, rejects any simple reductionism by relating ideology to experience and conceiving of "experience" as an active, even a creative human practice, the site of the struggle between different classes (each with its own experiences). Struc-

tural marxism rejects both the notion of "false consciousness" and reductionism by treating ideology as a level of the social formation, a discursive practice which produces experience and the place of the individual within it. By positioning the individual within a predefined space, ideology enables the reproduction of the structure-in-dominance to take place. Thus, it is precisely over the authority of the subject and of experience that structuralism challenges the culturalist conception of ideology. For the latter, experience has a primary authenticity while, for the former, it is necessarily displaced from the center, and both consciousness and Praxis are treated, in part, as the product of ideological practices and positionings. Finally, in its post-structuralist inflections, there is a necessary noncorrespondence between social practices and their ideological representations (and hence, between the practices and their ideologically determined experiences and positions). Subjectivity is endlessly displaced and the individual is continually fractured into multiple subject positions.

Hall accepts the "displacing effects" of ideology on subjectivity and experience, as well as the fractured nature of the subject. Rejecting the culturalist assumption of identity, however, he rethinks ideology as the historical articulations between forms of consciousness and forms of practice and struggle. Ideology is, for Hall, the web of meanings and discourses, the strings of connotation and their means of representation, within which social practices, consciousnesses, identities, and subjectivities are placed. This is the domain of discourse—where language is deeply penetrated and inscribed by ideology. Because of its displacements, one cannot simply "read back" from subjects and relations constructed or represented in discourse to a

determining reality outside of discourse (e.g., the given class position of particular meanings). Nevertheless, Hall argues, it is also wrong to conceive of the ideological level as "autonomous," floating free of the complex of other social practices and without effects from or on them. Ideological formations have to be analyzed in terms of their relations to other practices; ideology has real effects on and cannot be reduced to other practices. The ideological level has its own "relative autonomy" within the complex unity of practices which makes up a social formation. Thus, ideology becomes one of the key forms of contestation over the dispositions and struggles for power at different sites in society. From the perspective of either of the possibilities which are always in play in any historical situation—domination or resistance—and whose outcome no historical "law" can finally guarantee, the struggle is always—on the one side—to

articulate meanings and practices by creating or constructing those "unities" which favor a particular disposition of power; and—on the other side—to disrupt or "disarticulate" those constructed unities and to construct in their place alternative points of condensation between practice and experience which enable alternative dispositions of power and resistance to emerge and be empowered.

Because of the importance of these debates in contemporary cultural theory, we have decided to include the opening pages of this essay, despite their frequent references to authors with whom communications scholars might have little familiarity. It is our hope that the present essay will contribute to the growing appreciation of and interest in Hall's work, and broaden the scope of the positions, issues and vocabularies legitimated within communication studies in the United States.

NOTE

¹The entire lecture series will be published as: Stuart Hall with Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies*, by Macmillan Press Ltd. We gratefully acknowledge their permission to publish this essay in *CSMC*.

REFERENCE

Hall, S. (1980). Cultural studies: Two paradigms. *Media, Culture and Society*, 2, 57-72.
